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SUBJECT: FREE FORUM: HERE TODAY, BUT WHAT ABOUT TOMORROW?

Classified By: Ambassador Rodolphe M. Vallee for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: One key unknown of the June 17 elections is whether Zuzana Martinakova's Free Forum (SF) will obtain the necessary five percent of votes to enter parliament. The "one-woman party" has attracted socially liberal voters looking to fill the void left by ANO. Martinakova's message of support for health, education, and softer social reforms has wide appeal, as does her promise of "good manners" in politics. Unfortunately for SF, a recent intra-party dispute proved that its politicians are just as ill-mannered as the rest, and poll numbers have dropped significantly. The last surveys may be very influential in convincing potential voters that SF still has a chance, or that they should not waste their votes. If SF does manage to get into parliament, it could be a key deal-maker in the post-election horse-trading. It could either join Smer or help enable PM Dzurinda resurrect a four-party center-right coalition. End summary.

#### A Brief History

¶2. (C) Slobodne Forum was born when several SDKU members, led by deposed Minister of Defense Ivan Simko, defected after the autumn 2003 "Skupinka" affair. Simko's vision for the party was to mirror the SDKU reform agenda, but to bring democratic principles back into the politics, under his own leadership of course. He was therefore shocked when the small group of SF members chose Zuzana Martinakova as its new leader, by just one vote. (Note: SF members have since told us that Simko's uninspired speech at the party convention persuaded them he was not a good leader. End note.) Martinakova, a journalist by profession, had been Simko's protege. Since she took over SF, it has been widely said that there are two puppet-masters behind her every move: husband Marian Bednar (an MOD advisor during Simko's tenure who now works as a defense advisor to President Gasparovic) and Vladislav Chlipala (a former Slovak Intelligence Service Director in Kosice, who has the reputation among Kosice natives as a "weird" guy who is more a lone operator than a team player).

#### SF Agenda and Campaign: The One-Woman Party

¶3. (C) Poloffs met with SF MP Lubica Navratilova, and Ambassador hosted a lunch for Martinakova, Chlipala, and MP Jozef Hurban, to discuss the SF platform and campaign plans. All explained that SF appealed to urban, middle class professionals and small entrepreneurs. These voters generally favored the Dzurinda government's reform agenda but wanted to "soften" economic reforms to make them more palatable for ordinary people. On foreign policy, SF leaders assured us they did not differ from SDKU. With Martinakova's non-controversial public messages in support of education,

health care, and gentle social reform, Free Forum was considered an "acceptable" party for any potential coalition.

Her main public criticism was Mikulas Dzurinda's political style, and her main vow was to bring good manners back into public life. Privately, Dzurinda and Martinakova loath each other, distrust exceed only by Bednar's hatred of Dzurinda.

The strategy that set SF apart was its determination that Martinakova should be the only public face of the party.

#### The "Liberal" Void

14. (C) Pollsters estimate that since Pavol Rusko left the government in disgrace and his Alliance of a New Citizen (ANO) party disintegrated, the eight to ten percent of Slovaks that favor a free-market fiscal policy but a more progressive social policy are looking for a new home. Some of them were drawn toward Smer, others to SDKU, but most saw SF as a good alternative. It was the dissolution of ANO that bumped SF's poll numbers over the five percent mark, going as high as eight percent in some surveys. However, the socially liberal image is somewhat misleading; according to ANO MP Eva Cerna, Martinakova opposed legislation that would have made it easier to obtain an abortion, resisted meetings with women's groups, and refused to join a women's caucus in parliament. When the Ambassador asked if SF had a more socially liberal bent than SDKU, Chlipala rushed to assure him that Martinakova was "a Catholic woman."

15. (C) There had been rumors since the beginning of the year of a possible merger between SF and ANO. Just a few weeks before parliamentary elections, Chlipala (in the name of Martinakova) convinced a large group of ANO members in Banska Bystrica to join SF. Although local SF organizers were opposed to this "hostile takeover by Rusko," they were shunted aside. MP Branislav Opaterny (a former ANO member who served as State Secretary at the ministry of economy, and brother of the local SF chief) protested that the party leader who promised to apply democratic principles in politics was breaking her vow. Subsequently, Martinakova removed him from the candidate list (another breach of party procedure). The nasty war of words in the press destroyed the "good manners" image of the party, called into question Martinakova's skills as a leader, and caused an immediate erosion in the poll numbers. A disillusioned Opaterny recently told us that he originally hoped SF would get seven percent of the vote. Now he expected around four percent, and "five percent would be a miracle."

#### Martinakova's Weaknesses

16. (C) We had been trying to meet with Martinakova since SF was formed. On a half-dozen occasions she canceled at the last minute, and stood us up several times more. We took some consolation in hearing that other embassies had similar experiences. SDKU campaign chief Kamil Homola, who worked as her assistant during the 2002 campaign, once told us she was lazy; when handed a demanding campaign schedule she would ask "Do we really have to do all of this?" Navratilova told us that building a new political party was hard work, and Martinakova was simply too busy to meet with diplomats. SF foreign policy advisor Ivo Lancaric (who may be on the outs, since we met him with Opaterny) told us Martinakova was insecure and didn't want to meet with diplomats until she had studied what to say on foreign affairs. Opaterny said it was all a game; Martinakova wanted to give the image of a busy woman in high demand, thinking it would win her more respect.

We believe that only the personal intervention of the former and current Ambassadors to the U.S., Martin Butora and Rastislav Kacer, both of whom are friends and advisors to Martinakova, finally convinced her to accept the Ambassador's invitation to lunch. Once there, she was poised, friendly, and open, leaving a favorable impression.

17. (C) While initially supportive of the "One-woman" campaign strategy, Opaterny now says party members believe it was a big mistake. He described the SF headquarters as a cemetery;

while other parties are full of energy and campaign spirit, SF's paid office workers sit idly at their desks. Lancaric expressed tremendous frustration at Martinakova's management style. He said that as a journalist, she worked independently writing reports, but had no leadership experience. She did not know how to inspire a team, she was jealous of her colleagues, and when she was unhappy she kicked desks and yelled at people. They both described Chlipala as an absolute gatekeeper, who plans her every word.

No one can meet with Martinakova without his presence. They said his former experience as an intelligence officer makes him a master of manipulating facts and creating conspiracy theories, and that he aspires to head the SIS if SF enters the next government.

#### Free Forum: Hovering on the Edge

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18. (C) Free Forum's program is friendly to U.S. goals in Slovakia, despite the strange behavior of Martinakova and Chlipala. If the party receives enough votes to make it into Parliament, it could have a slight moderating effect on Smer, or boost the chances of a return to power by a center-right coalition. The question is: Will SF get five percent? The last polls published before elections had the potential to be very influential on SF's potential voters, who are generally educated, thinking people. The problem is that one showed SF with 4.6 percent support and the other showed 6 percent. Voters must now make the difficult decision of taking a risk and voting for the party, or choosing not to throw away their votes. In the latter scenario, SDKU would hope to pick up a significant portion. If SF comes close but misses the cut-off, its votes will effectively be divided among the parties that enter parliament in proportion to the overall percentage they received, thereby benefitting frontrunner Smer even more.

VALLEE